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Study Shows Gila River Diversion Project Unnecessary and Wasteful

There is no need for a water diversion project on the Gila River, New Mexico's last free-flowing river, according to a report released this summer by the Gila Conservation Coalition (GCC). GRIP is a key member of the coalition, providing staffing, fiscal agency, and administrative support.

According to the report, the future water supply needs of Silver City and the Mining District can be met through conservation and by developing new well fields or a combination of new well fields and surface water use for approximately one-tenth the cost of a Gila River diversion project.

The report was authored by Dr. Jennie Rice, an economist with the consulting firm ECONorthwest of Boulder, CO.

A Gila River diversion project is being discussed because federal legislation passed last year could provide as much as \$128 million for designing and building pumps, dams, pipelines, or other water-supply infrastructure. Called the Arizona Water Settlements Act of 2004, the law provides \$66 million for local water supply projects and up to \$62 million more specifically for the diversion and consumption of 14,000 acre-feet of water per year from the Gila, its tributaries, or underground water sources. An acre-foot is about 326,000 gallons – enough to last an average household two to three years.

The most likely buyers of this water would be Grant County municipalities – specifically Silver City, Bayard, Hurley, Santa Clara, and Hanover. Given the lack of studies of the costs of water supply alternatives and the likely demand for water, the GCC's economic analysis provides an important first step toward a realistic water plan for the region.

Funded by a grant from the Thaw Charitable Trust of Santa Fe, the analysis yielded these major findings:

1) Before investing in new supply sources, it is cost-effective for Silver City and the mining district to spend \$3 million to \$21 million on conservation measures that can achieve a 20 percent reduction in demand by 2025.

2) After accounting for federal subsidies provided by the Arizona Water Settlements Act, and assuming that Grant County would bear all of the remaining project costs, a Gila River

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Photo by Dennis O'Keefe

The Gila River supports a unique ecosystem, including endangered birds and fish.

Environment Secretary Overrides Staff, Weakens Hurley Soils Cleanup

New Mexico Environment Dept. (NMED) Secretary Ron Curry issued a final decision on the copper cleanup level for Hurley soils in late July, raising the maximum acceptable level for soil contamination from 3,100 parts per million (ppm) to 5,000 ppm. In doing so, Curry overruled his own staff and the department's consultants and significantly reduced the scope of Chino's cleanup effort in the former smelter town.

About half of the homes in Hurley are likely to have copper in their yards exceeding the 5,000 ppm level, making them eligible for the cleanup work Chino is now required to perform.

GRIP is disappointed that Secretary Curry opted for a compromise with Chino – whose consultants claimed that a level between 6,300

and 8,900 ppm would be appropriate – over a strictly science- and risk-based approach. The higher level of allowable copper in soil means there is a greater risk that children will get sick.

Chino Mine is required to develop a plan for removing soils from yards where copper concentrations exceed the revised standard. According to the NMED, copper in the town's soils could cause gastrointestinal distress, such as nausea and vomiting, among children who consume 1/100th of an ounce or more of dust or dirt.

Secretary Curry's decision requires that Chino identify all residences in the Town of Hurley with children under eight years of age and provide this information to NMED. It also requires that Chino develop a public

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